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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 000521

SIPDIS

EUR/WE (D. MENNUTI); DRL/IRF (T.FARR)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2012

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SUBJECT: THE ASSISI WORLD DAY FOR PEACE. THE VATICAN TAKES ON THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS.

REF: VATICAN 00445

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR NICHOLSON, REASONS 1.5 B.

1. (U) SUMMARY: POPE JOHN PAUL II LED AN INTERFAITH APPEAL FOR PEACE JANUARY 24 IN ASSISI, ITALY AT WHICH HE ISSUED A  
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RINGING CONDEMNATION OF VIOLENCE PERPETRATED IN THE NAME OF RELIGION. MORE THAN 300 RELIGIOUS LEADERS ATTENDED FROM AROUND THE WORLD TO SHOW SUPPORT FOR THE PAPAL CALL FOR DIALOG AMONG RELIGIONS AND CULTURES. THE MEETING, WHICH THE POPE CALLED IN DIRECT RESPONSE TO THE WORLD SITUATION POST-SEPTEMBER, INCLUDED REPRESENTATIVES OF WESTERN AND NON-WESTERN RELIGIONS. VATICAN-WATCHERS HIGHLIGHTED THE STRONG ORTHODOX PRESENCE. KEY MUSLIM PARTICIPANTS NUMBERED OVER THIRTY, INCLUDING A THEOLOGIAN FROM MECCA WHO SPOKE AT LENGTH WITH POLOFF. THE ASSISI MEETING REPRESENTED THE CULMINATION OF RECENT VATICAN EFFORTS TO COMBAT PERCEPTIONS OF A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) THE JANUARY 24 ASSISI "DAY OF PRAYER FOR PEACE IN THE WORLD" WAS THE OCCASION FOR UNUSUAL ENCOUNTERS AND UNLIKELY DIALOGUE. SHARING CENTER STAGE WERE ZOROASTRIAN AND CATHOLIC, ANIMIST AND MUSLIM, BUDDHIST AND BAPTIST, JAINIST AND QUAKER, HINDU AND ORTHODOX, AND MANY OTHERS FROM SCORES OF DISTINCTIVE FAITH TRADITIONS. AN ATTEMPT TO BRIDGE RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES IN AN AFFIRMATION OF COMMON VALUES, THE ASSISI MEETING REPRESENTED AN ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH CAPSTONE FOR THE JOHN PAUL II PAPACY. THE POPE'S OWN CONDEMNATION OF WAR, TERRORISM, AND, MOST ESPECIALLY, VIOLENCE IN THE NAME OF RELIGION, FURTHER REPRESENTED A VERY PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE GLOBAL CRISIS PRECIPITATED BY SEPTEMBER 11 (REF.

3. (U) THE POPE CONVOKED THE ASSISI GATHERING IN LATE NOVEMBER 2001 IN AN URGENT APPEAL FOR PEACE IN A WORLD WOUNDED BY WAR AND TERRORISM. THE VATICAN HAD LITTLE LEAD-TIME TO MOUNT A COMPLEX OPERATION IN LOGISTICS AND PROTOCOL. THE VATICAN HOWEVER IS A VETERAN HAND IN  
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ORCHESTRATING LARGE EVENTS, ESPECIALLY AFTER HANDLING THE MILLIONS OF PILGRIMS DURING THE JUBILEE YEAR. MOREOVER, THERE WERE HELPFUL PRECEDENTS IN ASSISI ITSELF, WHICH HAD HOSTED LARGE INTERFAITH GATHERINGS IN 1982, 1986 AND 1993.

4. (U) IN 1982 POPE JOHN PAUL II LAUNCHED THE ASSISI MEETINGS WITH A LARGE-SCALE COMMEMORATION OF THE 700TH BIRTHDAY OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI, THE CELEBRATED UMBRIAN SAINT OF POVERTY AND PEACE (WHO ALSO TRIED HIS HAND AT DIPLOMACY WHEN HE TRAVELED TO THE MIDDLE EAST TO SEEK AN END TO THE CRUSADES). IN 1986 THE POPE RETURNED TO ASSISI FLANKED BY MYRIAD RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN AN APPEAL TO END THE DANGEROUS DIVISIONS OF THE COLD WAR. IN 1993 JOHN PAUL II CONVOKED A SMALLER GATHERING IN ASSISI TO ADDRESS THE CRISIS IN THE BALKANS. THE 1986 MEETING IN PARTICULAR BECAME THE TOUCHSTONE FOR SUBSEQUENT VATICAN EFFORTS IN INTERFAITH RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL DIALOGUE. OTHER INTERFAITH GATHERINGS, NOTABLY UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE COMMUNITY OF SANT'EGIDIO, INVARIABLY INVOKE THE SPIRIT OF THE 1986 MEETING IN ASSISI.

ASSISI IN 2002: THE VATICAN TAKES ON THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS  
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5. (SBU) IN THE WAKE OF SEPTEMBER 11 THE VATICAN HAS SOUGHT TO COUNTER PERCEPTIONS OF A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS. ITS SUPPORT FOR THE U.S.-LED CAMPAIGN AGAINST TERRORISM HAS CONSISTENTLY BEEN TEMPERED BY EFFORTS TO DEFUSE ANY RELIGIOUS ASPECT TO THE CONFLICT. EVEN AS VATICAN OFFICIALS LAUDED  
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PRESIDENT BUSH'S OUTREACH TO ISLAM AND HIS VISIT TO AN AMERICAN MOSQUE, THE VATICAN HAS BEEN PURSUING ITS OWN PROGRAM OF OUTREACH TO MUSLIM LEADERSHIP. IN SEPTEMBER A VATICAN DELEGATION (THAT INCLUDED AN AMERICAN WOMAN WITH A VATICAN PASSPORT) TRAVELED TO TEHERAN TO CONTINUE THE "DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS" BETWEEN THE HOLY SEE AND IRAN. IN LATE OCTOBER THE VATICAN AND THE AL-AZHAR ISLAMIC

UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO MOVED FORWARD THEIR SCHEDULED CALENDAR OF MEETINGS IN ORDER TO PRESS QUIET YET TIMELY INTERFAITH DISCUSSIONS. IN NOVEMBER POPE JOHN PAUL II CALLED ON CATHOLICS TO FAST FOR PEACE ON DECEMBER 14 -- THE LAST DAY OF RAMADAN -- FORGING AN UNPRECEDENTED IF SHORT-LIVED MOMENT SHARED BETWEEN THE TWO FAITHS. AND IN PUBLIC STATEMENTS THE POPE, WITH INCREASING EMPHASIS, HAS CONDEMNED VIOLENCE PERPETRATED IN THE NAME OF RELIGION, IN EFFECT REPUDIATING

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INFO LOG-00 NP-00 ACQ-00 CIAE-00 INL-00 DODE-00 DS-00  
VC-00 TEDE-00 INR-00 IO-00 LAB-01 VCE-00 NEA-00  
DCP-01 NSAE-00 SS-00 T-00 SNIS-00 NISC-00 DSCC-00  
DRL-02 SAS-00 /004W

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P 040601Z FEB 02  
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY  
INFO ALGERIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
ISLAMIC CONFERENCE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY  
AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY  
AMCONSUL MARSEILLE PRIORITY

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THE SEPTEMBER 11 TERRORISTS AND BIN LADEN FROM THE ACCEPTED FAMILY OF BELIEVERS. "THERE IS NO RELIGIOUS GOAL WHICH POSSIBLY CAN JUSTIFY THE USE OF VIOLENCE BY MAN AGAINST MAN," THE POPE REITERATED IN ASSISI, IN THE PRESENCE OF SOME THIRTY MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS.

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16. (SBU) WHILE THE POPE'S OWN ASSISI PROCLAMATION "VIOLENCE NEVER AGAIN! WAR NEVER AGAIN! TERRORISM NEVER AGAIN!" DOMINATED THE HEADLINES, THERE WERE A NUMBER OF INTERVENTIONS READ BY OR ON BEHALF OF LEADERS OF DIFFERENT FAITHS, CREEDS, AND DENOMINATIONS. EACH STATEMENT HAD ITS OWN ACCENT AND IDENTITY, WITH NO EVIDENT PLOYS FOR SECTARIAN OR ETHNIC ADVANTAGE. SHEIK MOHAMMED AL-TANTAWI, HEAD OF CAIRO'S AL-AZHAR MOSQUE, WAS ABSENT, YET SENT A DECLARATION READ BY A REPRESENTATIVE. THE STATEMENT, A COMMITMENT TO THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE, DID RAISE EYEBROWS HOWEVER, LAUDING POPE JOHN PAUL II AS A CHAMPION OF PALESTINIANS AND OMITTING ANY MENTION OF JUDAISM OR THE RABBINICAL PRESENCE ON STAGE. YET FOR THE VATICAN INDIVIDUAL STATEMENTS COUNTED LESS THAN THE FACT AND WITNESS OF EACH LEADER'S PRESENCE, NOTABLY THE MUSLIM AND ORTHODOX REPRESENTATIVES. "THE VERY FACT THAT WE ARE LISTENING TO ONE ANOTHER," THE POPE SAID, "IS A SIGN OF PEACE."

THE SECOND FRONT: ADVANCING RAPPROCHEMENT WITH THE ORTHODOX.  
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17. (U) THE ASSISI ENCOUNTER INCLUDED A HOST OF ORTHODOX PATRIARCHS, THUS MARKING A KEY STEP FORWARD IN THE VATICAN'S OUTREACH TO EASTERN CHRISTIANITY. THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH OF CONSTANTINOPLE, BARTHOLOMEW, WHO HAS MET THE POPE SEVERAL TIMES, LENT LEGITIMACY AMONG ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS TO THE GATHERING. THE TRUE WATERSHED HOWEVER WAS THE PRESENCE OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX PATRIARCH'S PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE, METROPOLITAN PITRIM. VATICAN WATCHERS WERE QUICK TO READ INTO THE METROPOLITAN'S PRESENCE HOPES OF A SOFTENING IN THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX PATRIARCH'S HITHERTO STRENUOUS OPPOSITION TO

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A PAPAL VISIT TO RUSSIA, REITERATED PUBLICLY ONLY DAYS PREVIOUSLY. INDEED, FIDES, A VATICAN-BASED NEWS-SERVICE, CALLED THE HIGH CALIBER OF ORTHODOX SUPPORT FOR THE ASSISI MEETING "AN UNHOPED FOR STEP CLOSER FOR CHRISTIANS OF EAST AND WEST, UNTHINKABLE ONLY MONTHS AGO."

ASSESSMENT: A COUP FOR THE VATICAN.  
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18. (U) THE ASSISI GATHERING GENERATED ALMOST ENTIRELY POSITIVE PRESS FOR THE VATICAN. IT REINFORCED THE VATICAN'S CAREFULLY CULTIVATED IMAGE AS A MODERN AGENT OF DIALOG BETWEEN CULTURES. IT PROMOTED THE POPE'S UNIQUE CLAIM TO SPEAK AS A UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZED MORAL AUTHORITY. THE VATICAN ITSELF ADVANCED ITS AGENDA OF GREATER RAPPROCHEMENT WITH THE ORTHODOX CHURCHES, THOUGH A PAPAL TRIP TO RUSSIA REMAINS FOR NOW A DISTANT POSSIBILITY. AT ASSISI THE VATICAN ALSO TOOK THE OCCASION TO SHOWCASE THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES -- E.G. THE SYRO ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE OF ANTIOCH, THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH, THE ARMENIAN CATHOLICOSATE OF CILICIA, ETC. -- WHOSE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE A MEDIA SENSATION IN THEIR STRIKING CLERICAL GARB. THEIR PRESENCE IN ASSISI WAS A SALIENT REMINDER THAT THE OVERARCHING ISSUE FOR THE VATICAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND OFTEN ELSEWHERE IS THE PROTECTION OF IMPERILED CHRISTIAN MINORITIES. FINALLY, AND MOST IMPORTANT IN THE NEAR TERM, THE ASSISI MEETING PROVIDED AN INTERFAITH IMPRIMATUR TO THE VATICAN'S POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS STRATEGY TO ENSURE THAT THE AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 11 DOES NOT EVOLVE INTO A WAR BETWEEN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS.

ALL ABOARD! TICKETS ON THE PEACE TRAIN.  
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19. IN A FITTING SYMBOL, JOHN PAUL II AND OVER 300 RELIGIOUS LEADERS DEPARTED TOGETHER FOR ASSISI FROM THE VATICAN RAIL STATION, ITS FIRST USE FOR PAPAL TRAVEL SINCE 1979. DUBBED THE PEACE TRAIN, IT WAS A MEDIA METAPHOR FOR THE ASSISI MEETING, EMBARKING THE RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP ON A JOURNEY WITH A COMMON PURPOSE. IN MANY RESPECTS, ASSISI WAS A FORUM FOR POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS, NOT JUST FOR THE VATICAN BUT FOR OTHER RELIGIOUS LEADERS, TOO, WHO WERE FURNISHED A READY-MADE STAGE ON WHICH TO ATTEST THEIR COMMITMENT TO PEACE AND DIALOG.

FOSTERING CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOG.  
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ACTION EUR-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	ACQ-00	CIAE-00	INL-00	DODE-00	DS-00
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	DCP-01	NSAE-00	SS-00	T-00	SNIS-00	NISC-00	DSCC-00
	DRL-02	SAS-00	/004W				

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110. (SBU) WHILE THE FACT OF ISLAMIC TURNOUT AT ASSISI WAS PROMISING, IT WAS LIMITED. SANT'EGIDIO LEADERS LAMENTED TO POLOFF THE DIFFICULTY IN DEVELOPING A BASE OF MUSLIM INTERLOCUTORS OPEN TO THE MESSAGE OF DIALOG. MOREOVER, INTERESTED MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE NOT NECESSARILY  
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PREPARED TO ADOPT A PUBLIC STANCE IN FAVOR OF DIALOG.

110. (C) POLOFF RETURNED FROM ASSISI TO ROME IN THE COMPANY OF A LONGSTANDING MUSLIM COLLABORATOR OF SANT'EGIDIO, A FRANCOPHONE ALGERIAN PROFESSOR IN MECCA WHO PARTICIPATED UNOFFICIALLY IN THE INTERFAITH GATHERING. MUHAMMED ESSLIMANI (STRICTLY PROTECT) TOLD POLOFF THAT HE HAS BEEN WAGING AN UPHILL BATTLE WITH FACULTY COLLEAGUES ON THE MERITS OF OUTREACH TO THE NON-MUSLIM RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY. HOWEVER, SEPTEMBER 11, HE SAID, HERALDED A SEA CHANGE. RELIGIOUS

LEADERS NOW INCREASINGLY RECOGNIZED THAT ISLAM HAD A DUTY TO ADDRESS THE ATROCITIES COMMITTED IN ITS NAME AND TO COMBAT WIDESPREAD IGNORANCE ABOUT NON-MUSLIMS. HE ADDED THAT SOME FORMERLY CRITICAL COLLEAGUES, WHO THEMSELVES ESCHewed ALL CONTACT WITH NON-MUSLIMS, HAD NOW EXPRESSED NEWFOUND APPRECIATION FOR HIS OWN PERSONAL OUTREACH. NONETHELESS, THERE WAS GREAT IGNORANCE CONCERNING NON-MUSLIMS, A NEED FOR EDUCATION, AND FOR CONTACT WITH NON-MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF GOOD WILL. HE REGRETTED THAT THE FEW MUSLIM LEADERS WHO PRESENT THEMSELVES AS SO-CALLED MODERATES LACK REAL THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CREDIBILITY, HARSHLY DENOUNCING THE MUFTI OF MARSEILLES IN PARTICULAR. IT WAS IMPERATIVE TO DEVELOP A NEW RELIGIOUS GENERATION WITHIN THE ARAB WORLD, HE SAID, EXPLAINING HIS DISCREET COLLABORATION WITH SANT'EGIDIO AND HIS UNOFFICIAL PRESENCE AT THE ASSISI MEETING.  
NICHOLSON

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